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SUBJECT: ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE VERSHBOW MEETS WITH  
SENIOR ISRAELI DEFENSE OFFICIALS

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

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11. (C) SUMMARY: On November 1 and 2, Assistant Secretary of Defense (ASD) for International Security Affairs, Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, met with a number of senior Israeli defense officials in Israel including: Ministry of Defense (MOD) Director General (DG) Pinchas Buchris; Head of MOD Political Military Bureau Amos Gilad; Assistant Chief of Defense Major General (MG) Benny Gantz; and Head of MOD Intelligence Analysis Production Brigadier General Yossi Baidatz. The Israelis expressed positive views on continued U.S.-Israel cooperation particularly on Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) and the ongoing Juniper Cobra missile defense exercise. Israeli officials explained that they were going through an unprecedented period of calm due to the deterrent effect of Operation CAST LEAD, but that below the surface were a number of significant dangers. They continued to emphasize that Iran represents the greatest strategic threat to the region, both its nuclear program and its "axis" with Syria, Hezbollah, and HAMAS. They also expressed skepticism about Palestinian President Abbas's future, given his weakened position as a result of his handling of the Goldstone Report and his inability to get the full settlement freeze he had pushed for; they questioned his ability to restart peace negotiations. Israeli officials were concerned about the deteriorating Turkey-Israel relationship and discussed threats emanating from both Syria and Lebanon. END SUMMARY

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Bilateral Relations  
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12. (S) ASD Vershbow's trip to Israel came as a number of high-level Israeli and American officials were meeting on key issues. On October 31, Secretary of State Clinton arrived in Jerusalem for talks on the peace process with Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Barak, and Foreign Minister Lieberman. In addition, EUCOM Commander Admiral Stavridis arrived in Israel on November 1 to observe the Juniper Cobra-10 ballistic missile defense exercise. The ASD's visit also came in the wake of recent high-level discussions on Israel's QME in Washington, and the October 21 meeting of the Joint Politico-Military Group in Tel Aviv.

13. (S) On QME, ASD Vershbow asked for Israel's assessment of recent discussions, and across the board, Israeli officials expressed gratitude for U.S. efforts on this front and voiced optimism on the steps moving forward. Amos Gilad acknowledged the sometimes difficult position the U.S. finds

itself in given its global interests, and conceded that Israel's security focus is so narrow that its QME concerns often clash with broader American security interests in the region. Israeli officials acknowledged the impressive nature of the QME dialogue mechanisms recently established, but stated that the results of the process are what truly matter.

MG Benny Gantz defined successful QME relations as "the effective process plus the right mitigations." While not explicitly saying it, Gantz seemed to acknowledge that Israel does not expect that all QME decisions will break in its favor, but that Israel only expects a fair and equitable process that incorporates "intimate dialogue." DG Buchris thanked Vershbow for the recent success of the JPMG and said he looks forward to convening the first meeting of the agreed upon working groups by the end of November. Vershbow stated that the technical working group discussions would be launched soon, and that he was looking forward to future Israeli participation on this issue.

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Iran Remains Top of Mind  
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¶4. (S) Israeli officials continue to uniformly emphasize that Iran's nuclear program and regional hegemonic ambitions are the greatest strategic threats to Israel. They view Iran as the center of a radical axis that includes Syria, Hezbollah and HAMAS.

¶5. (S//NF) Israel continues to offer a worst-case assessment of the Iranian nuclear program, emphasizing that the window for stopping the program (by military means if necessary) is

rapidly closing. General Baidatz argued that it would take Iran one year to obtain a nuclear weapon and two and a half years to build an arsenal of three weapons. By 2012 Iran would be able to build one weapon within weeks and an arsenal within six months. (COMMENT: It is unclear if the Israelis firmly believe this or are using worst-case estimates to raise greater urgency from the United States). Amos Gilad explained his view of the repercussions of an Iranian nuclear capability stating that it would give Iran a free hand in supporting "HAMAS" in Gaza and "Hezbollah" in Lebanon.

Gilad also argued that Saudi Arabia would definitely react to a nuclear Iran by obtaining a weapon (with Pakistani assistance) and Egypt would almost certainly follow. He was less sure about whether Turkey would respond by pursuing a nuclear weapon. Regardless, the security situation in the region surrounding Israel would be dramatically altered should Iran acquire a nuclear weapons capability.

¶6. (S//NF) ASD Vershbow queried various Israeli officials about their view of the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) proposal and Iran's recent equivocation on the agreement. Israeli officials uniformly expressed support for the agreement but made clear that by itself it was not sufficient. They stated that it was only one stop on the way to containing the Iranian nuclear program and that it must be followed by a freeze-for-freeze agreement and eventually the full suspension of uranium enrichment, as well as the end of work on the newly disclosed site at Qom. They warned that the TRR agreement by itself could serve as a major victory for Iran if it legitimized in the world's eyes Iran's right to enrich uranium on its own soil. None of the Israeli officials expressed surprise about Iran's apparent reversal on the TRR agreement, as they viewed this as typical Iranian negotiating style and part of an Iranian strategy of delay. Amos Gilad stated that Iran would never agree to anything that contradicted its overall strategic goal of achieving a nuclear weapons capability.

¶7. (S) When queried about how the U.S. views the Iranian response, ASD Vershbow explained that the United States was still seeking greater clarity on what was the real Iranian bottom line. We may need time to ascertain whether Iran's response was in fact a serious walk-back or whether it would be willing to abide by the initial TRR agreement that had been agreed to in principle in Geneva on October 1. However,

he also emphasized that American patience is not unlimited and that if the TRR agreement did collapse, the U.S. would likely begin pursuing the pressure track.

18. (S//NF) Israel was also highly concerned about Iran's support for proxies, with General Baidatz emphasizing that there are multiple bases in Iran where IRGC, Quds Force, Hezbollah, HAMAS, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad operatives all train together and share knowledge. MG Gantz also emphasized Iran's role as a weapons supplier to Syria and that Syria actively facilitated arms transfers to Hezbollah. He expressed concern about Iranian shipments of weapons via Sudan to Egypt and into Gaza. On the Russian delay in delivery of the S-300 (SA-20) to Iran, Gilad voiced satisfaction with the train of events, acknowledging Prime Minister Netanyahu's "secret" visit to Moscow and President Obama's engagement with Medvedev had both played a role. Gilad was worried about Russian readiness to support tough sanctions on Iran. ASD Vershbow said the Russians' signals on sanctions were mixed, but they seemed genuinely concerned about recent Iranian missile tests and the revelation of the Qom facility.

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West Bank and Gaza  
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19. (S) Of particular interest throughout the meetings was the subject of the Palestinian political situation. It was widely agreed that President Abbas is currently in a weakened political state, and Israeli officials generally cast a dour assessment of Abbas's future. In one exchange, Amos Gilad stated his opinion that Abbas will not survive politically past the year 2011. Gilad further stated that Abbas is facing unprecedented criticism within the Palestinian Authority over his handling of the Goldstone report, and that this, coupled with a stubborn HAMAS, has weakened Abbas considerably. The Israelis said the perception in the Arab world was that the U.S. had encouraged Abbas to take

difficult positions on Goldstone and settlements only to walk away from him. ASD Vershbow queried Gilad over measures that could be taken to bolster Abbas. Gilad responded by stating that Israeli-Palestinian peace discussions need to be resumed immediately, but without preconditions, and that both parties need to seek further cooperation on a range of issues -- specifically on the security sector front. Gilad expressed optimism over the current atmosphere in the West Bank, citing improvements in the security and economic spheres, and further stated that the reduced Israeli Defense Force (IDF) footprint in the West Bank has made conditions ripe for advancing the relationship. Gilad closed, however, on a sourer note by stating that the Government of Israel has little faith in the Palestinian negotiating team.

110. (S) ASD Vershbow transitioned off the political discussion to focus on the Palestinian Authority Security Force (PASF). Specifically, Vershbow highlighted the concern that Palestinian forces were seen as lacking real authority, and therefore asked for steps that could be taken to give the PASF more visible control of security. Israeli officials responded by citing the decreased number of direct- action incursions, checkpoints and patrols, and seemingly drew a correlation between reduced IDF activity and increased PASF authority (COMMENT: Despite Israeli assurances, U.S. and Palestinian officials continue to highlight the corrosive effect of regular Israeli incursions). MG Gantz cited Palestinian security sector reform as a major accomplishment, stating that on-the-ground coordination between the PASF and IDF units has improved dramatically. Despite these positive developments though, Israeli officials repeatedly underscored the importance of retaining the right to disrupt terrorist operations in the West Bank and Gaza. Additionally, they stated that if Israel allowed a weak and untrained security force to take over in the West Bank in the short term, the result will be deterioration of the Israel-Jordan relationship over the long term. The prospect of poor Israeli-Jordanian relations, according to Amos Gilad, is

unacceptable, and would result in the loss of "strategic depth" for Israel.

¶11. (S) ASD Vershbow urged his Israeli counterparts not to solely focus on the short-term "here and now," but rather to envision the possible benefits that a strong and viable West Bank could have for Israel's security situation in the future. Vershbow used this point to springboard to the issue of HAMAS and Gaza, asking whether success in the West Bank could serve as a "magnet" and help solve the Gaza problem. He asked if Israel had made any headway in terms of an information operations campaign to better communicate with the people of Gaza. Israeli officials offered very little in the way of a communications strategy or long-term vision for the territories, but reinforced Israel's core belief that HAMAS has only sinister motives, and that any attempt Fatah might make to improve its standing in Gaza would only be met with HAMAS opposition. General Baidatz articulated Israel's concern by highlighting recent intelligence that HAMAS is trying to acquire from Iran (and potentially test-fired the previous weekend) the 60 km-range Fajr-5 rocket that could reach Tel Aviv. These actions, according to Baidatz and other officials, make any discussion of Palestinian reconciliation both premature and unrealistic. Ambassador Vershbow sought further clarification on this point, querying Israeli officials over the level of public support for HAMAS.

Specifically, the ASD asked if there was any way to undermine support for HAMAS vis-a-vis the peace process. Amos Gilad responded simply by saying that one of Israel's biggest concerns is the atmosphere created by disjointed peace talks. Specifically, Gilad stated that political promises of peace, unification, and reconciliation -- concepts that are never realized -- are only resulting in a climate of uncertainty that is unhealthy. On this matter, Gilad mentioned that Egypt's role in pushing reconciliation is not helpful and often counterproductive, but that he expects Egypt to continue floating the idea at future junctures.

¶12. (C) In bringing up the Goldstone Report, DG Buchris emphasized that the Government of Israel took extraordinary steps to mitigate civilian casualties, despite HAMAS's deliberate use of civilians as human shields. He stated that the IDF made over 300,000 phone calls to alert civilians before bombing legitimate military targets. He also compared Israeli operations in Gaza to U.S. operations in Iraq and

Afghanistan and stated that Israel would do whatever was necessary to protect its population. In response, ASD Vershbow recalled U.S. support for Israel in handling of the Goldstone report, and offered to share U.S. experience in investigating incidents in Iraq and Afghanistan as the GOI considered whether to conduct an additional investigation.

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Anxiety Over Turkey  
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¶13. (S) Israeli officials also expressed growing anxiety over the Turkey-Israel relationship after the Turkish cancellation of Israel's participation in the ANATOLIAN EAGLE joint exercise. They expressed their belief that the strategic relationship with Turkey is critical, but that PM Erdogan's views have increasingly penetrated into the military and have been part of the reason for the deterioration in relations as Turkey looks East rather than West. Gilad believes this is understandable as Turkey's EU accession prospects look increasingly doubtful, and they must balance their relations with both regions to succeed.

¶14. (S) Baidatz stated that the Turks have an agenda to contain any Kurdish influence in Iraq and that to achieve it they need to improve their relations with Iran and Syria. In his view, the worst possible outcome would be a new Turkey-Iran-Syria-Iraq axis in the Middle East. Gilad also noted that Turkey wanted to improve its relationships with Iran and asserted that it had made some very aggressive plans recently to support HAMAS. However, he had a less

pessimistic view than Baidatz, stating that Turkey had played a positive role in Iraq and that generally the Turks' agenda was for a stable Iraq that would be commercially beneficial to Turkey. Gilad stated that he was skeptical of any political rapprochement between Israel and Turkey in the near term, but that Israel would continue to foster the military-to-military relationship because of its strategic importance.

¶15. (C) Gilad also queried ASD Vershbow about what Israel might do to improve its relationship with Turkey. Vershbow explained that Turkey wants to be influential in the region and that if it jeopardizes its relationship with Israel, it will undermine its status and its leverage as an evenhanded mediator. He also commented that Erdogan's ideological views may lead him to focus on Turkey's Islamic neighbors, but he is also a realist who will not want to jeopardize Turkey's ties to the U.S. or NATO. The U.S. and Israel should be patient with Turkey and stay engaged, encouraging the Turks to play a constructive role in the region. He stated that at the upcoming bilateral defense talks between the U.S. and Turkey in December, he and Under Secretary Flournoy would emphasize the need to improve Israel-Turkey relations.

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Quiet on the Northern Border  
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¶16. (S) Israeli officials remain pleased with the "quiet" nature of its northern border -- something they attribute to the deterrent effect Israel has built up following OPERATION CAST LEAD and the 2006 war in Lebanon. However, according to Israeli officials, it is a foregone conclusion that strong cooperation exists between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Hezbollah. The level of cooperation far exceeds what many assume is simply the day-to-day problem of corruption within the ranks. On the contrary, Israel believes that LAF/Hezbollah cooperation is a matter of national policy. Amos Gilad attributed this dynamic to elements of nationalism, stating that Lebanese government and military officials choose not to confront Hezbollah out of patriotic zeal. Moreover, according to Gilad, any information shared with the United Nations Interim Force-Lebanon (UNIFIL) goes directly to Hezbollah by way of the LAF.

¶17. (S) Israeli officials have major concerns over developments within Hezbollah -- specifically, its relationship with Syria and Iran. General Baidatz spoke of this relationship and drew attention to the existing supply of Fateh-110 long-range missile that Iran sent to Syria. Israeli officials believe these missiles are destined for Hezbollah. According to Baidatz and others, if the delivery were to occur, this would significantly alter Israel's

calculus. Under such a scenario, the looming question for Israeli policymakers then becomes: "to strike or not to strike."

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Optimism on Syria  
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¶18. (S) General Baidatz offered an Israeli intelligence assessment that if Syria were able to achieve peace with security and obtain greater U.S. involvement, it may pull away from Iran's orbit. He explained that President Assad used his "negative assets," namely Hezbollah and HAMAS, to make himself relevant and that ultimately Assad wants it all: the Golan Heights; peace with Israel; better relations with the U.S.; a strong relationship with Iran; and a continued relationship with Hezbollah. Ultimately, Gen Baidatz asserted that if Assad had to choose one thing, it would likely be peace with Israel. ASD Vershbow asked if Hezbollah could be sustained without Syrian support. Baidatz acknowledged the difficulty in answering this question, but stated his belief that it would be a gradual process before Hezbollah could completely wean itself from the Syrian support apparatus and that, ultimately, both Hezbollah's and



Iran's flexibility would be significantly reduced.

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Mil-to-Mil Relations with Egypt  
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¶19. (C) Amos Gilad commented that he would like to see a complete peace with Egypt, but noted there was very little in the way of Egyptian-Israeli military relations and that Egypt continued to train its military for war with Israel. Gilad stated that Egypt was not likely to attack Israel and did not represent a short-term threat, but that at the very least it was necessary to have modest contact between Egyptian and Israeli officers. He expressed frustration by describing Egypt and Israel's "frozen peace" and that neither side knows anything about the other. He noted that the last high-level military visit for Egypt was in 1991.

¶20. (S//NF) Israeli officials agreed that Egypt's counter-smuggling efforts have improved, particularly since Operation CAST LEAD in January. However, they stated that gaps still exist and that Egypt needs to focus its efforts on stopping Bedouin smuggling in the Sinai. Gilad said he was disillusioned with the technical monitoring solution; tunnels continue and smuggling is increasing even with U.S. assistance along borders with Egypt.

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Iron Dome and Juniper Cobra - Strengthening the Relationship  
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¶21. (S) On Iron Dome, DG Buchris (Assisted by retired General Nagel) briefed ASD Vershbow on the latest developments, stating that Iron Dome is planned to have an initial operating capability by the spring of 2010, and that technological advancements have made the system much more viable defending against short range rocket attacks from Gaza or Southern Lebanon. Buchris also emphasized the need for additional USG support to help fund additional production of Iron Dome to protect the civilian population in both the North and the South. Buchris also noted progress on the upper- and medium-tier ballistic missile defense systems (Arrow-3 and David's Sling, respectively). In an earlier meeting, MG Gantz quantified the importance of fielding adequate missile defense systems by citing critical Israeli infrastructure such as Ben Gurion Airport and the Ashkelon electricity plant. Suffering the loss or damage of places such as these, according to Gantz, would be a major blow to Israel and, therefore, every effort to stand up a capable missile and rocket defense shield should be taken.

¶22. (S) After Gantz highlighted three areas of focus for the IDF (detering conventional threats, responding nimbly to asymmetric threats, and developing an integrated missile defense system), ASD Vershbow asked for Gantz's initial impression of the Juniper Cobra-10 exercise. Gantz stressed the importance of this exercise, and stated that so far it had been a success. ASD Vershbow stated that the timing of Juniper Cobra was somewhat fortuitous, given the recent

developments with Iran. On the larger issue of missile defense, ASD Vershbow stressed U.S. efforts to try and persuade Russia to become more involved in missile defense cooperation, but stated that Russia's realization that the new U.S. missile defense approach in Europe is more effective than the previous one is causing the Russian leadership to ask many questions about the system.

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Summary  
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¶23. (S) All of ASD Vershbow's interlocutors carried a consistent message emphasizing that: Iran remains Israel's greatest threat; recent events have weakened President Abbas; the PASF have performed well in the West Bank; and the relative calm on all Israel's borders does not obscure the

fact that Israeli intelligence is seeing significant activity and planning by Iranian surrogates, namely HAMAS and Hezbollah, with facilitation from Syria. These threats suggest that Israel must remain vigilant and prepared for the calm to end one day.

¶24. (U) ASD Vershbow has cleared this message.  
CUNNINGHAM